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**THE BENEFITS OF DANCE THERAPY FOR OLDER
ADULTS WITH DEMENTIA: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW
OF THE LITERATURE**

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Science in Nursing**

**In the College of Health and Human Services
At Salem State University**

By

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Abstract

This systematic review of the literature surrounding dance therapy for older adults with dementia serves to educate nurses working with the population of older adults with dementia about the associated benefits of dance therapy. There is a need for engaging interventions for older adults with dementia. Dance has been shown to increase feelings of wellbeing, alter behaviors, enhance memory and facilitate social interactions. To investigate whether dance interventions improve behaviors of adults suffering from dementia, research on this topic is necessary. A systematic review of English-language articles published between 1998 and 2016, focusing on the benefits of dance therapy with memory-impaired adults suffering from dementia, was conducted. Because of the limited number of sources, the search criteria included a seminal article published in 1998. Sixty-seven articles were assessed for eligibility through full review. For the purpose of this thesis, five articles met inclusion criteria. Upon review, the following information was found: dance encourages social interactions and physical exercise. Dance is an engaging activity for older adults with dementia, encouraging individuals to learn new behaviors, and improves implicit memory. Additionally, unlike other forms of exercise, dance promotes a strong connection between mind and body. Though the literature reflects remarkable consistency suggesting dance therapy is beneficial for older adults with dementia, future research exploring this area is important to nursing.

Keywords: dance, dance therapy, dementia, movement therapy, memory impairment

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The Benefits of Dance Therapy for Older Adults With Dementia: A Systematic Review of the Literature

Dementia is a disease process that prevails in older adulthood. General practice nurses have an active involvement caring for patients with dementia – from screening for the disorder to supporting patients once the diagnosis is made (Warren, 2016). A cognitive dysfunction, dementia results in problems with memory, attention, language, orientation, thinking and problem solving. In addition, the disorder also brings psychiatric and emotional problems such as personality, emotional control, depression, agitation and delusions (Warren, 2016). Those with dementia have problems with daily living such as driving, shopping, eating and dressing. According to Palo-Bengtsson (1998) a seminal researcher on the disorder, delusions seem to increase over time and may result from the inability to recall recent events.

There are several forms of dementia. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, which is mainly a disease of old age. Further, Alzheimer's has an insidious onset with a gradual progression of symptoms (Warren, 2016). Memory loss is the most prominent cognitive deficit. Of the non-cognitive features, depression is the most common and occurs early in the disease process (Warren, 2016). Another form of dementia is vascular dementia. This form of dementia results from reduced brain blood circulation. In vascular dementia, the intellectual deficit has a sudden onset and progresses in a stepwise process. Typically, symptoms begin with unsteadiness or weakness of a limb and may be mistaken for a stroke (Warren, 2016). A terminal illness, nursing care of those afflicted with dementia focuses on symptom management and provision of meaningful interventions. Though there are many medications to assist with

non-progression of the disease, there is a strong need for alternative interventions such as dance to address the psychosocial, spiritual, and physical wellbeing of older adults with dementia.

Dance has been used therapeutically for thousands of years. Further, dance therapy uses psychotherapeutic movement to support the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social integration of a person. Equally important, dance therapy may be of value for people with developmental, medical, social, physical, or psychological impairments. Dance therapy is defined as "the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration of the individual" (American Dance Therapy Association [ADTA], 2016, para. 2) and is based on the understanding that the body and mind are interrelated. With dance comes associated music and movements and plays an important role in the expression of oneself. Because of the deep connections dance provides, it is closely associated with memory (Lapum, 2016). Individuals remember moments associated with dance that has occurred throughout their lives. For some, dance has been a hobby and frequent activity. For others, dance happens behind closed doors or even driving in cars. Dancing is also common at weddings and parties. Dance is often a part of the human experience, many times without conscious thought (Lapum, 2016).

Background/Significance

According to Guzman, Hughes and Rochester (2012), there is a need for engaging interventions for individuals with dementia. In order to investigate whether dance interventions would improve behaviors of adults suffering from dementia, further research is recommended. According to Palo-Bengtsson and colleagues (1998), dance

therapy could generate positive thoughts and improve self-image. Additionally, incorporating dance as an intervention may improve verbal skills and social interaction among older adults with dementia. To explore this topic, a systematic review of the literature was conducted.

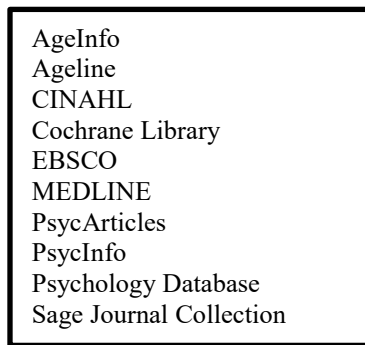
Dance therapy relates to nursing as a non-pharmacological approach to memory-impaired individuals in the health care setting. Additionally, dance therapy incorporates simple exercises that stimulate areas in the brain that may improve memory, in addition to providing physical exercise. Exploration of multiple databases including CINAHL and MEDLINE revealed current gaps in research pertaining to dance therapy and older adults with dementia. Wu and colleagues (2015) explain that there is an abundance of research that supports that physical exercise has beneficial effects for physical functions in healthy older adults. However, the effects on the cognitive function and quality of life in individuals with dementia were less consistent.

Because of the serious impairments and inability to perform meaningful activities that is caused by dementia, there is a need for nursing care interventions in addition to a supporting environment for those with the disease (Bengtsson,1998). Currently, there is little research that focuses on the benefits of dance therapy on older adults suffering from dementia. The aim of this paper is to explore the benefits associated with dance therapy for older adults with dementia.

Methods

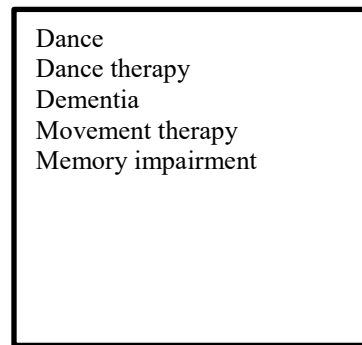
A systematic review of English-language articles, published between 1998 and 2016 focusing on the benefits of dance therapy with memory-impaired adults suffering from dementia was conducted. Sixty-seven articles were assessed for eligibility through

full review. For the purpose of this thesis, five articles including seminal research from 1998 met inclusion criteria. Figure 1 portrays the databases used to search for articles relevant to the study. Figure 2 portrays the keywords used to search for articles relevant to the study.



- AgeInfo
- Ageline
- CINAHL
- Cochrane Library
- EBSCO
- MEDLINE
- PsycArticles
- PsycInfo
- Psychology Database
- Sage Journal Collection

Figure 1 Search databases



- Dance
- Dance therapy
- Dementia
- Movement therapy
- Memory impairment

Figure 2 Keywords

Articles addressed dance therapy or non-pharmacological interventions with dementia patients. Any style of dance was considered. Both qualitative and quantitative research studies were considered in addition to systematic reviews. Figure 3 shows the literature search strategy of the studies in this literature review (N=5). Research focusing on interventions other than dance with dementia patients was also excluded. Articles that were not peer reviewed or written in a language other than English were not considered.

Limitations

In addition to the valuable information learned from current research, there are limitations. Much of the research that is currently available is focused on movement therapy. Movement therapy may include Dance, Tai Chi, Yoga and Pilates. Although dance is a form of movement therapy, there is limited research that focuses solely on dance therapy with dementia patients.

Furthermore, the subjects of research are a very vulnerable and challenging population. Older adults with dementia may also have comorbidities that increase challenges in daily living. Depression is common amongst older adults with dementia, which may alter the participants' willingness to get involved in dance therapy sessions. Although research on this topic is becoming more up to date, for the purpose of this study, a seminal article dating back to 1998 was used. Guzman-Garcia and colleagues (2013) made multiple recommendations on how to broaden research. It is now up to researchers to prioritize this approach when looking at effective therapies for older adults with dementia.

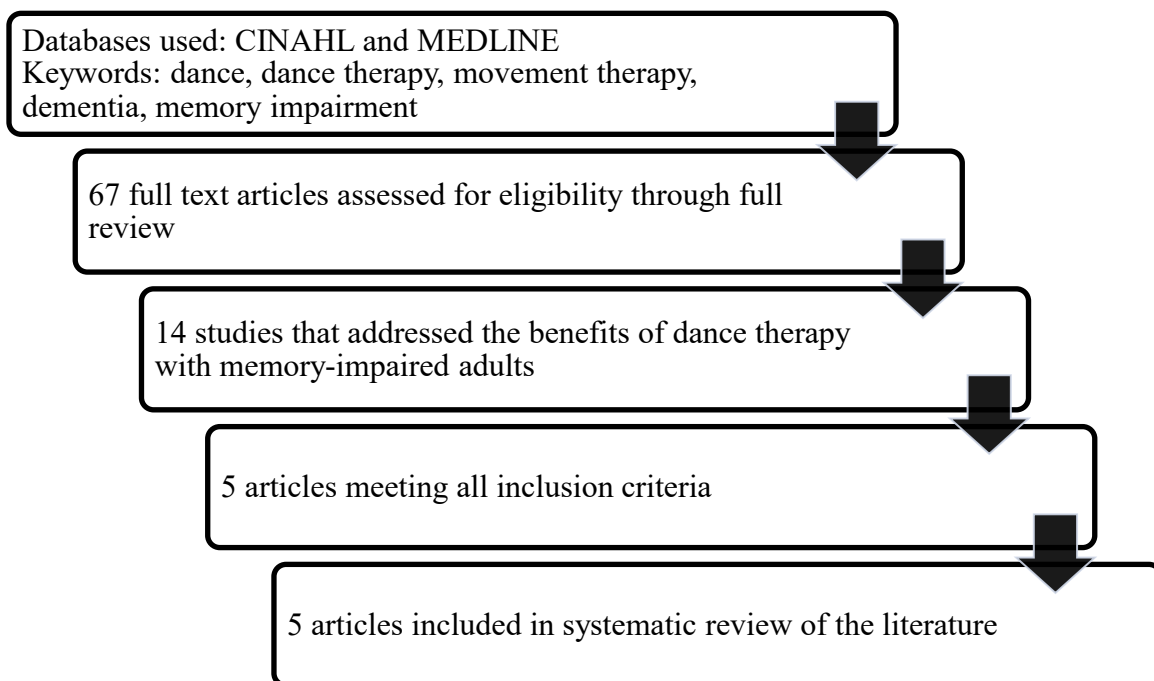


Figure 3: Literature Search Strategy

Results

A common theme to arise in the literature identified the various limitations brought on by dementia. One of these limitations is the afflicted person's ability to

communicate with others (Nystrom, 2005). During group dance therapy sessions with persons suffering from dementia, verbal and non-verbal means of communication were displayed. Further, the way the demented persons used body movements, free dance movements, speech and singing allowed for expressions of thoughts, memories and emotions.

Bengtsson, Winblad and Ekman (1998) executed a study in which social dancing was a nursing intervention that supported persons with dementia. In the study, nurses recognized the positive values of dancing and concluded social dancing meets the needs of the patients suffering from dementia. Similar to Nystrom's study, Bengtsson found that social dancing is a way of maintaining communication between persons suffering from dementia and their caregivers.

Another limitation of dementia is isolation. Isolation occurs as a result of the inability to communicate. People who suffer from dementia often feel alone in his or her world. Nursing staff found it difficult to interpret non-verbal expressions of older adults with dementia (Nystrom, 2005). An expressive therapy used for non-verbal communication is dance therapy. According to Nystrom (2005), work that takes place in dance sessions is done non-verbally and focuses on the use of body movements to promote both physical and mental wellbeing in the individual.

Another theme present in the literature was, the role of dance in relationship development between care staff and older adults with dementia. A relationship between the patient and caregiver is built from dance and body movements, which ultimately strengthens non-verbal means of communication (Nystrom, 2005). A systematic literature review of a range of dance-based interventions in care homes identified

different dancing approaches such as Dance Movement Therapy; Psychomotor Therapy; Social Dancing and Dance Therapy. From these, seven qualitative and three quantitative studies were found to decrease behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia (Guzman-Garcia, Hughes, James, & Rochester 2012). Additionally, the quality of interaction between staff and residents improved.

Guzman (2012) interviewed residents and staff after a dance therapy session and reported that the session brought benefits to their care by increasing social interaction. Because of non-verbal communication displayed in dance therapy, caregivers were able to discover resident skills and feelings. Further, dance movement therapy engaged residents and boosted participation among patients residing in a long-term care facility (Guzman, 2012). Also, staff was able to see how motivated and engaged individuals were during dance therapy sessions. Both patients and staff were able to express themselves in many different ways, which allowed for better understanding of one another (Guzman, 2012).

In addition to increased social interaction, Guzman (2012) discovered that physical, mental and sensory stimulation and the activation of memories were seen during dance therapy. Further, Guzman (2012) noted that patients remember songs when dancing and were very excited. Patients communicated and expressed themselves more freely. Dance therapy builds confidence and creates a bond between everyone who participates. During dance therapy sessions there is a very supportive atmosphere, which makes it easier to express feelings.

Palo-Bengsston and Ekman (2002) purported that social dancing supports personal and cultural identity as dance is often learned in childhood. Further, dance may

positively influence preservation of certain aspects of memory among older adults with dementia (Palo-Bengsston & Ekman, 2002). Intact learning of motor procedures was present during social dancing and social skills were activated which increase patients' feelings of identity (Palo-Bengsston & Ekman, 2002). Concentration was kept during dancing. Also, patients were able to communicate their emotions and were in turn able to become aware of their feelings. In addition to communication, social dancing increased physical activity among older adults with dementia (Palo-Bengsston, Winblad & Ekman, 1998). Autonomy was also present as participants were motivated to dance. Furthermore, an atmosphere of trust was created during dancing sessions (Palo-Bengsston, Winblad & Ekman, 1998). This study indicated that participants' intellectual, emotional and motor functions were preserved and more importantly were supported during social dance sessions.

According to Lapum and Bar (2016), there is a range of cognitive, behavioral and psychological symptoms in dementia-related diseases. With this variability, it is difficult to make one single treatment that will be effective for people with dementia as a whole. Dance is one intervention that addresses the variability among the disease (Lapum & Bar, 2016). Simply from clapping one's hands, or tapping one's feet, dance can be integrated into the care of patients with dementia. In addition to the physical movements, dance is often practiced with music amongst peers. For individuals with dementia, dance remains as an inclusive activity as no one is left out of the experience.

Different from previous literature, Ravelin, Isola, and Kylma (2013) studied the effects of dance performance as an intervention for individuals with dementia. Observing a dance is an active and emotional experience for those who have dementia. Further, the

study was performed to evaluate how persons with dementia experience dance performances (Ravelin, Isola & Kylma, 2013). After watching four different performances, older persons with dementia identified watching the performance as a process. Additionally, their attitudes were positive after the performance. During the performance, the focus on their disease process was absent and even awoke some memories (Ravelin, Isola & Kylma, 2013).

Discussion

This review identified five studies that met inclusion criteria. It is the responsibility of the nurse to collaborate with others in order to provide the best care possible for patients. Dance therapy would increase interprofessional collaboration with nurses, social workers, recreational therapists and case management. In regard to long-term care, nurses should focus on client-centered care and the psychosocial well being of the individual (Lapum, 2016). Dance should be implemented as a therapeutic intervention for those suffering from dementia because it is patient centered and supports psychosocial wellbeing.

Although verbal communication may be limited, dance therapy may improve communication skills among older adults with dementia. Dance therapy is a nonverbal form of communication that promotes patient wellbeing. In addition, dance therapy strengthens relationships between caregiver and patient. Non-verbal communication allows individuals to understand one another. Quality of care in long-term care facilities may increase due to the associated benefits of dance therapy. In other words, nurse communication with patients and understanding of feelings will be comprehensible

through dance movements. Patients will be able to express themselves and nurses will be able to respond appropriately.

Often, focus of care for individuals with dementia is on what they cannot do., such as, whether or not individuals with dementia can understand or express themselves verbally, know where they are, or who they are. However, when someone no longer functions as they typically did, they still remain a person. Dance movement therapy focuses on what a person can do rather than their disabilities.

Researchers have begun developing further insight into the benefits of dance therapy with memory-impaired adults. Palo-Bengtsson (1998) found that dance enhanced effective communication between individuals with dementia and their caregivers. In addition, dance therapy has positive benefits whether the individual with dementia was actively dancing or observing others dancing. Similarly, Ravelin, Isola and Kylma (2013) found that observing a dance performance was both an active and emotional experience for older adults with dementia. Lastly, Guzman and colleagues (2013) found a decrease in problematic behaviors as well as an increase in communication, cognition and enhanced moods.

Conclusion

Further research in this area is recommended. Results from further research will be valuable for other researchers, healthcare providers, family members and individuals with dementia. In response to this research, policies and interventions may be created to use in professional health care systems. Dance is a free intervention that can be implemented in hospitals, long-term facilities and senior community centers and homes.

Further, this intervention is one that can be enjoyed by the participant, caregiver and audience. Modifications can be made for individuals with disabilities.

Providing holistic, patient centered care is a priority in nursing. Dance therapy is an intervention that focuses on the ability of the patient while increasing physical exercise, communication skills and promoting an overall wellbeing. This review has identified major themes in current literature. Benefits associated with dance therapy among older adults with dementia needs to be addressed by nursing researchers and implemented in all care settings when applicable.

Relevance to Clinical Practice

- Older adults with dementia are present in all clinical practice settings and not only expected in specialist areas.
- There is evidence that implementing dance therapy for older adults with dementia will be beneficial.
- Researchers need to develop this topic further to provide better insight to the benefits associated with older adults suffering from dementia.

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